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Which Path? What Goal?

Mark 8:27-36
Revelation 21:1-6a

Last October, a group of eighth and ninth graders and their parents began to meet – mostly on Sunday afternoons – to follow a new Confirmation Curriculum called Big God – Big Questions. They have spent the school year talking about what they believe and about what they think about God, Life, Faith and a whole host of very big questions. The passage we read from Mark is one of the passages they studied. It contains one of those big questions. Jesus asks “Who do you say that I am?” And today, those 8th and 9th graders come to profess their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and to claim the Christian faith for themselves. They have all been raised in families who taught them about God and loved them dearly. But, today, they profess faith in God for themselves – not what their parents say – but to say it for themselves.

In the Church, we have always talked about what they do today as a Confirmation. They are confirming for themselves what they believe. And we have always said that they are now “joining the church” and becoming adult members. But you know what, I want to apologize to this year’s Confirmation Class and to you for that language. Because what is clear is that the language of joining the church and membership in the Church is confusing and has caused much trouble in the Church. I am sorry for my part in misleading us all.

To say today that these youths become members of The Church sounds like we are welcoming them into a club. To be a member of any institution normally means that we get membership privileges and responsibilities and that, like becoming a member of a gym, we gain membership access to certain equipment and a community and provide members with good customer service. Members pay their dues or member fee, show up at least a couple of times a year, and can therefore say that they are members and put a sticker on their car that proclaims their membership. And often when we talk about professing our faith as “joining the Church” that has been understood to mean that we are now part of a service organization whose primary purpose is to serve – our needs first and then the needs of the community and the world. We pay our dues and show up when it suits our schedule and therefore are “members.” And in that understanding, when our needs are not met, then we look for another, more responsive Church that will meet our needs and serve as we would like.

Friends in Christ, God did not come to earth in human form so that we would be members of the Church. This understanding of what it means to confirm our faith is weak, poor and misleading. I apologize for my part in that misleading and for using, without challenge, this

language to talk about what we are doing. It is time to be clear about what it means to confirm our faith and what it means to say that we are Christian disciples. The hard part is that some of that language and understanding is partly true. But the fact that it is partly true has blinded us to the ways in which this understanding of Church is also wrong, false and misleading.

Instead of continuing to talk only about membership in the Church, I think that it is time to talk about what our Confirmation Class does today and what you and I do every day as “Choosing a path, setting a goal and living towards a destination.”

What these eighth and ninth graders do today, and what I invite us all to do today is to claim the Christian faith for ourselves and to say bravely that we believe that the God, who created all that is and rules the universe, came to earth in human form so that we might know God’s love and live God’s love. Jesus called us to follow him in living out God’s love ourselves and to invite others also to walk this path, set this goal and live towards the destination of the Kingdom of God. It is more accurate to call those who believe in Jesus Christ “followers” or “disciples of Jesus”, than it is to call us “members of the The Church.”

Today we celebrate the youth in this congregation who profess faith in Christ and who have decided for themselves to begin to walk on the path of faith towards the goal of living in love and community with God and with those who seek God’s purpose for the world and for their own lives. To be a Christian is NOT simply to be a member, but is instead to be on a journey. To confirm our faith means that we get up every day and walk that path. To be a Disciple of Jesus Christ means that we measure what we do and say by whether or not it serves our purpose of reaching our goal – loving, honoring and serving God – which is our ultimate goal in this life.

We don’t refuse to steal, lie or murder because we might go to Hell for it. Followers of Jesus don’t steal, lie or murder because those things take us off of the path of living in love and community with God.

And, we don’t refuse to steal, lie or murder because we think that if we are good enough, we will not suffer or be hurt by evil or be kept safe and prosperous. That is the big lie of the American Christian Church. We share what we have, tell the truth and preserve and revere all of God’s creatures because we love God. Suffering, pain, illness, loss and death come to all of us. That is the human condition. We cannot avoid suffering, pain, illness, loss and death. And frankly, the human desire to avoid suffering, pain, illness, loss and death is probably the thing that keeps us most often from following Jesus.

After Jesus acknowledged Peter’s confession in Mark’s Gospel – “You are the Messiah/Christ/Anointed One.” Jesus begins to talk about what it looks like to follow the path of discipleship and Jesus begins to talk about pain, betrayal, death and resurrection. But Peter – the stand-in for every one of us – says, Jesus! Don’t say those things! I think Peter was thinking, “this is not good for the bottom line! People won’t join our movement if they think they have to die! Let’s talk about nice things, how God blesses us and increases our

investments if we are faithful enough!” But Jesus calls Peter the very devil for thinking these things. And then Jesus gives us as clear of a description of what it means to walk the path of Christian discipleship as we get. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it.” (Mk 8:34b-35) That description of faith and discipleship is a long way from being a member of a well-respected social service club.

Christians walk in the path of faith and follow Jesus because we know that evil, illness and death come to all of us. We expect it, and are not surprised. Instead, we know that when suffering, evil and pain come, they help remind us that all human beings are limited and temporary, and that God alone is eternal and unlimited. When we suffer, when we are sideswiped either by evil or by our own weakness and limitation, it is easy to feel lost. But, that is exactly when we need to think of our faith as walking a path towards the goal of God’s kingdom. When we are sad, grieving or afraid, we walk the path of faith – praying, sharing what we have, praising God in worship, and studying Scripture. That’s how we find our way back to the path of faithful discipleship and know we are on the right path.

Years ago, Columbia served as a training ground for a women’s marathon. Runners from all over the country came to train in distance running. And to provide a training course, the organizers went all over downtown, Heathwood and Forest Acres and painted a blue line on the road to mark the course route. So, runners would begin running, follow the blue line and so not get lost as they trained to run the marathon. And, I knew a young man who had just gotten his driver’s license and was very excited about the freedom that driving provided him. He took a friend in his mother’s car and went to meet some friends. But on the way home, he got turned around and lost. As a new driver, he realized that he had not paid close attention to landmarks and had always just ridden in the car without paying attention. He consulted his friend, who confessed to being just as lost and they both panicked, briefly. Then, the driver saw the answer. He saw the blue line in the road and he knew that that blue line went right in front of his house. So, he reasoned, if they just followed the blue line, they would eventually end up at home. And that is what they did. When they got lost, they gave up trying to find their own way and became followers of the blue line.

When we realize that we are lost, confused or unsure, I invite you to find that blue line – come back to Scripture and come back to worship, and come back into the community of faith. We are all trying to follow Christ – not exactly sure of where we are at times, but walking in the faith that where Christ leads is life, truth, hope, light and joy. And when we begin to follow other lines that lead us away from Scripture, worship and the community of faith, then we can be sure that we are not walking the path of Christian faith.

The passage we read from Revelation is the Apostle John’s best effort at describing what it feels like to live in total communion with God. And most of the time I have heard this passage described as a vision of Heaven (which it is). But I say to you that this vision is not simply what happens after we die. This vision of communion and fellowship with God is a description of

what life can be like now and later. Because walking the path of Christian faith is not what we do to get into heaven, but it is how we live now that allows us to taste peace, light, joy and love – both NOW AND LATER.

Today, as our youth model for us what it means to claim and to profess their faith, we celebrate that they are choosing their path and setting their goal. The challenge is for all of us to do the same. To walk the path and welcome the journey that will lead us to loving relationship with God. Jesus never said, to be saved you must recite the Apostles' Creed and understand the doctrine of the Trinity. But Jesus did say, "Follow me."